

Avoiding Plagiarism

(4 pages)

Knowing how to cite sources is an important part of writing. Using someone else's words or thoughts without giving proper credit to your source is plagiarism, and plagiarism is both ethically and legally wrong.

Sterling College takes charges of plagiarism seriously, and instructors expect students to use proper in-text and bibliographic citation techniques. In-text citation, sometimes called parenthetical citation, occurs when you cite the author and/or page number of your source within the paper, either in or immediately following a passage in which you have quoted or paraphrased. Bibliographic citation is sometimes referred to as a “works cited” page or a “reference list.” This page at the end of a paper contains the bibliographic information of all sources used in that paper.

Different courses may require different citation styles (APA, MLA, Chicago, etc.), but all citation styles have common elements. **In-text citation** requires a brief mention of the author and possibly the page number of the book or article from which you are borrowing information. **Bibliographic citation** contains more detailed information about your source, such as author, title, year of publication, edition or volume number, city of publication, and publishing company. Your instructor will probably state which citation style he or she prefers. If you do not know, ask.

Before you learn how to cite correctly, you must have a good understanding of what plagiarism is. Most students know that copying entire sentences, paragraphs, or papers from books or journals constitutes plagiarism, but some students do not understand that “copying and pasting” from the Internet without acknowledging sources is also plagiarism. Many students fail to recognize the importance of acknowledging sources even when they borrow short words or phrases. Still other students inadvertently plagiarize because they fail to cite sources when they paraphrase, or borrow *ideas* from other writers. In all of these cases, you must document the source(s) of your information.

Below are two hypothetical cases of plagiarism. Each is followed by examples of proper in-text citation. The first example involves the direct quoting of information; the second involves paraphrasing. **Please note that the examples of proper citation follow APA style guidelines. Depending on your major and the course(s) you are taking, you may be required to use a different style.** Also note that the citation after the SOURCE quotations is **not** representative of how you would cite information within the text of your paper, since this is a special example.

1. EXAMPLE OF PLAGIARISM INVOLVING A SHORT PHRASE QUOTED DIRECTLY

SOURCE

Every writer is starting from a different point and is bound for a different destination. Yet many writers are paralyzed by the thought that they are competing with everybody else who is trying to write and is presumably doing it better. This can often happen, for instance, in a writing class. (William Zinsser, *On Writing Well* [1976; New York: Harper and Row, 1985] 122)

PLAGIARISM FROM A HYPOTHETICAL WRITER

Writing can be difficult work. Some people never get past the first sentence because they are paralyzed by the thought that they are competing with everybody else. Even cabinet-level professionals at major corporations can fear having their writing compared to that of other cabinet members.

In the example above, the phrase “paralyzed by the thought that they are competing with everybody else” has been copied directly from the source. Although it may seem to some people like trivial work since it is a short passage, proper credit must be given to the person who first wrote those words. Moreover, since it has been copied word for word, it should be placed in quotation marks. Below are a couple of examples of how the passage could be revised to include proper in-text citation.

EXAMPLES WITH CORRECT CITATION

Writing can be difficult work. Some people never get past the first sentence because they are “paralyzed by the thought that they are competing with everybody else.” Even cabinet-level professionals at major corporations can fear having their writing compared to that of other cabinet members (Zinsser, 1985, p. 122).

or

Writing can be difficult work. Some people never get past the first sentence because, as Zinsser (1985) points out, they are “paralyzed by the thought that they are competing with everybody else.” Even cabinet-level professionals at major corporations can fear having their writing compared to that of other cabinet members (p. 122).

As the examples above demonstrate, any direct quote *must* be placed in quotation marks, even if you are quoting only a word or two. In addition, you must cite the author and page number, if applicable.

2. EXAMPLE OF PLAGIARISM INVOLVING PARAPHRASED INFORMATION

In the following example, the hypothetical author has borrowed ideas instead of specific words.

SOURCE

Your subconscious mind does more writing than you think. Often you'll spend a whole day trying to fight your way out of some verbal thicket in which you seem to be tangled beyond salvation. Surprisingly often a solution will occur to you the next morning when you plunge back in. While you slept, your writer's mind didn't. (William Zinsser, *On Writing Well* [1976; New York: Harper and Row, 1985] 123)

PLAGIARISM FROM A HYPOTHETICAL WRITER

We do more writing than we think we do because much of our writing occurs subconsciously. Sometimes we go to sleep worrying about how to revise a paragraph and wake up the following morning knowing exactly what to do. This is because our writer's mind was working while we slept.

While the hypothetical writer changed the wording from the original source, the essence of the expressed idea is not his or her own. Because the writer did not give credit to the author who first communicated the idea, he or she has plagiarized.

EXAMPLES WITH CORRECT CITATION

We do more writing than we think we do because much of our writing occurs subconsciously. Sometimes we go to sleep worrying about how to revise a paragraph and wake up the following morning knowing exactly what to do. This is because our writer's mind was working while we slept (Zinsser, 1985, p. 123).

or

In *On Writing Well*, William Zinsser (1985) addresses the relationship between writing and the subconscious. He says that we do more writing than we think we do because much of our writing occurs subconsciously. Sometimes we go to sleep worrying about how to revise a paragraph and wake up the following morning knowing exactly what to do. This is because our writer's mind was working while we slept (p. 123).

In these examples, no quotation marks are needed because no information has been copied word for word. However, credit must be given to the original author.

You should use good judgment when deciding if you should quote or paraphrase. You should quote when an author has expressed an idea better than you could express it in

your own words. Paraphrase when you are more concerned about sharing the actual information from your source—not necessarily the way he or she has expressed it. In either case, remember that your instructors want to read *your* work. When completing assignments, keep in mind the “80-20 rule.” That is, at least 80% of your work should be your own: direct quotes and paraphrased material should account for no more than 20% of your assignments.

You don’t need to cite the source of common expressions such as *the grass is always greener on the other side*, but if you are unsure about whether an expression is “common,” err on the side of cautiousness. You would rather spend a few moments citing a source than a few days or weeks dealing with charges of plagiarism.